

# Letters

Dear Radical Philosophy,

Sheelagh Strawbridge's article 'From "Over determination" to "Structural Causality": Some Unresolved Problems in Althusser's Treatment of Causality' (RP 38) was informative and served to help me get to grips with this widely quoted contemporary thinker. However, I'm still not entirely clear about various matters pertaining to the concept of contradiction and its use as a building block of analysis. Perhaps I've missed a vital piece of debate or argument at some stage, or perhaps the unfamiliar style of Althusser's writings has thrown me off course.

Contradiction and overdetermination are often spoken of in the same breath. Indeed, on page 106 of *For Marx* Althusser seems to argue that contradictions are 'always overdetermined'. We are shown the meaning of contradiction through the use of the term in Althusser's discussion of the Russian Revolution, describing the antagonisms between different groups of people, their purposes at loggerheads; social forces pulling in different directions. Whereas Hegel characterised the essence of any historical period by a single internal principle, Althusser (like Marx) does not see the contradiction characterising society as a simple unitary one. Nor can it actively precipitate revolution unless 'circumstances' and 'currents' conspire with it to form a 'ruptural unity'.

The general contradiction assumed to dominate a period (e.g. the forces and relations of production embodied in the antagonism between two classes) is active in a variety of subordinate contradictions which may all come 'to play in the same court'. These may have different origins, different senses, different levels and points of application. The circumstances and currents which constitute a contradiction are more than its phenomena pure and simple. Whereas they derive from the relations of production they are at the same time its conditions of existence:

... the contradictions are not seen as separate from or in any sense external effectivities upon the whole. They have their existence, and can only be thought of as part of an articulated structure in which they are defined and determined, and in turn defining and determining.

(Strawbridge, 1984, p. 10)

On the other hand we must be careful not to think of all these specific instances of contradiction as 'pure phenomena' of a 'general contradiction'. While the 'general contradiction' animates all the subordinate contradictions they have sufficient individual integrity (due to their constitution in concrete historical circumstances) not to be dissipated in the internal unity of a simple contradiction.

The unity they constitute in this fusion into a revolutionary rupture is constituted by their own essence and effectivity, by what they are and by the specific modalities of their action.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 100)

Thus, a contradiction seems to comprise a dialectical process between two moieties - the circumstances of its genesis and a general contradiction. It is the nature of this process which appears under-explained in Althusser's discussion.

The second part of my confusion concerns the ontological status of contradictions. I'm inclined to suppose that rather than enjoying the same kind of existence as the concrete circumstances with which they putatively interact, contradictions are hypothetical constructs, entities inferred,

presumed to underlie the body of historical events which we experience. For example:

... the capital-labour contradiction is never simple but always specified by the historically concrete forms and circumstances in which it is exercised.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 106)

In other words you've got to spot it lurking somewhere behind an ongoing stream of events. How might one reliably detect it?

Contradiction refers to antagonisms, tensions, forces acting in different directions, different bodies of people attempting to assert their rights to limited resources. Sufficient commonality is assumed to underlie all these situations for them all to embody the essence of contradiction. The task of making us believe that they all come together in a ruptural unity is thus much easier - it is somehow 'natural' that contradictions should come together to act in concert since they all have the property of contradiction. The extent to which this property is an imputation by an observer is obscure.

Contradiction is used in a metaphorical sense too, to conjure up the mass of historically concrete events which it motivates:

... I should like to suggest that an overdetermined contradiction may either be overdetermined in the direction of historical inhibition, a real block for the contradiction (for example, Wilhelmine Germany), or in the direction of revolutionary rupture (Russia in 1917) but in neither condition is it ever found in a pure state.

(Althusser, 1977, p. 106)

Here, contradiction refers to the gamut of events, praxen, currents and forces which may evolve towards revolution or away from it. Whereas the contradiction is realised through the 'concrete', for the purposes of analysis these concrete matters are collapsed into a contradiction.

Given that contradiction is pivotal, it seems that we are allowed confidently to zero in on it as the important nexus among the plethora of experience which must presumably constitute a concrete historical circumstance. We dissect it, reify it and suppose that it is in some way an explanation of the circumstances from which it was excised. But as Barrington Moore (*Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 1967) remarked, to derive a hypothetical construct from a body of events, and then use it to explain those events is to indulge in circular reasoning. If the contradiction is then given privileged status - being used in analysis in preference to the events themselves - then the confusion is compounded.

It may be that I've got it wrong. Contradictions may not be logical entities. Contradictions might be metaphors, mythopoeic categories, and trying to elaborate the meaning of the concept strips it of its metaphorical power. Its key role in Marxist and post-Marxist thought seems to have resulted in a deepening of the term as it is used in everyday language. It's scarcely possible to speak of 'common sense', say, as contradictory without bringing in overtones of dialectical necessity. I conclude from the foregoing ruminations that a contradiction is not a self-evident motif of social relations, but an accomplishment of deduction; far more the creature of our minds than the circumstances of its putative genesis.

Brian Brown

Dear Editors,

As I continue to find Althusser's writings somewhat cryptic I can appreciate Brian Brown's difficulties. In pondering his comments I have spent some time considering Althusser's discussion of historical time (largely Reading Capital, Ch. 4), and I think that at least some illumination is to be found there.

A departure from the Hegelian conception of the whole as a unified or 'spiritual' totality, in which the parts merely express an inner essence, towards a conception of a complex hierarchically structured totality of relatively autonomous levels, requires a departure from any notion of homogeneous continuity in time.

Each level of the social formation has its own peculiar time. The processes of development of the various levels - relations of production, political superstructures, aesthetic productions, scientific formations and so on - are all relatively autonomous from each other. Each level is subject to its own internal contradictions and each has its own specific time and history. Consequently it is not possible to make an 'essential section' through a unified historical time and there is no 'base-time' in relation to which the backwardness or forwardness of a level can be thought.

Nevertheless, all the levels are articulated one with another to form an organic whole. They exert reciprocal determinations upon each other and their specific characters

and interrelationships are given by the character of the totality. The structure of the whole determines the character of the elements - each level is defined in terms of its place in the totality.

Hence a conception of the 'synchronic' (the complex unity of the totality - the modes of articulation of the various elements and levels) is required, both for the conceptualisation of the real historical present, the 'conjuncture', and for the adequate conceptualisation of any of the levels, i.e., in order to define the economic, the political, the philosophical and so on, a theory of the totality is prerequisite.

Contradictions refer to real relationships between elements within levels and between levels. They are not hypothetical constructs but can only be theoretically derived from the conception of the totality. The 'general contradiction', the economy, being 'determinant in the last instance', defines the overall character of the social formation - the specific hierarchical ordering of levels and their modes of articulation. It thus defines the 'situation when revolution is the task of the day'. However, an actual revolutionary rupture of the totality would require the coincidence of ruptural moments in the histories of multiple elements and levels fusing into a 'ruptural unity'.

Yours sincerely,  
Sheelagh Strawbridge

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